

Tucson Lifestyle

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TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JUDY WADE

CATALINA ISLAND:



STILL CHARMING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

In the 1930s and '40s it was the ritzy playground of revelers who came to swing to the sounds of the big bands. By the 1950s and '60s, with jet travel putting Hawaii just five hours from the West Coast, vacationers forsook the little island for more exotic destinations. Catalina became a laid-back place to spend some time without spending much money. = And then it put on a whole new face. Refurbished hostelrys and restaurants with sophisticated menus now line the crescent of Avalon Harbor, and interesting boutiques tempt shopping sprees. Catalina has become a favorite day-trip, as well as a convenient weekend retreat. = Despite the innovations, the island hangs onto its time-warped essence. Total permanent population is just 2,300, swelling to almost 10,000 on sunny summer weekends. The comfortable, easy-going atmosphere encourages you to do just what you want to do, at your own pace. = Most guests arrive via the Catalina Express (310-519-1212 for reservations), a comfortable ferry that leaves San Pedro or Long Beach half a dozen times a day for the one-and-a-half-hour trip (55 minutes if you catch the new jet catamaran at \$35, round-trip). You debark on The Mole, a wharf whose rodent-like name means a breakwater or dock. From there it's half a block to the center of Avalon, the island's only sizeable town. ▶

EXPLORING CATALINA

Your first stop should be the Visitor Information Center at the base of the Green Pleasure Pier next to The Mole, for brochures and an island map. As you plan your strategy, you can sip a mimosa at the Busy Bee Cafe while you fuel up for the day on a spicy buffalo sausage omelette. From the cafe's breezy outdoor deck you'll gaze out at neatly-moored rows of small private boats. You may also see the huge white silhouettes of the Viking Serenade or the Holiday, luxury liners that regularly call at Catalina as part of their three and four day mini-cruises from Los Angeles.

Catalina is a place for walking. Unlike the smoggy mainland, cars are strictly limited and there are none for rent. Even the local sheriff uses a specially-equipped golf cart with radio, siren and high-speed gears. If you must have wheels, bicycles rent for \$5 an hour for a one-speed, and golf carts are \$30 an hour.

Restaurants and hotels cluster around Crescent Avenue and Avalon Harbor. Hotel Villa Portofino (\$65-\$190 for a king-size bed with Continental breakfast) has a large sundeck overlooking the water. The Pavilion Lodge (one-night packages with transportation from the mainland, mini-submarine tour and Continental breakfast, \$53-\$110) surrounds a pleasant, grassy courtyard adjacent to the beach. History buffs might enjoy settling into the Zane Grey Hotel (\$65-\$85) built in 1926 by the famous author who wrote a number of books while living on the island. The original living room with grand piano and fireplace is still a welcoming resting spot. Hotel rates on Catalina are seasonal, highest during summer months, and vary from weekday to weekend. Excellent package rates often are available for the asking.

The island's most talked-about hostelry is the elegant, white Inn on Mt. Ada (\$230-\$470 during the week, \$320-\$590 weekends). In 1919 William Wrigley Jr., patriarch of the famous chewing gum family, bought the island and began developing it as a resort for all Americans. The Inn, a classic Georgian Colonial mansion that's now a bed and breakfast, was the family's summer home. Handmade linens, antique furnishings and homey fireplaces make it a favorite romantic getaway. With only six rooms, weekend reservations must be made months in advance.

Along the green Pleasure Pier, open-air stands purvey buffalo burgers while eateries along the Crescent offer views and eclectic fare. One of the island's favorites is the Ristorante Villa Portofino, a Mediterranean-style place with inventive pasta dishes like Tagliolini Portofino that combines spaghetti and chicken, sun-dried tomatoes and asparagus with a touch of cream (\$14.95). Save room for dessert. The pastry chef spares no calories with the rich tiramisu and decadent profiteroles.

SIGHTSEEING

The famed and much-photographed Art Deco Casino is visible from almost everywhere in Avalon. Built by Wrigley in 1929 as a ballroom for the big-band sounds of Jimmy Dorsey, Glenn Miller and others, it's now a movie theater with elegant red velvet draperies and crystal chandeliers. Take a guided tour of the casino and you'll see the magnificent top-floor ballroom. If the recorded 1930s music inspires you to execute a quick fox trot on the polished hardwood floor, nobody objects. The casino's ground floor houses the Catalina Island Museum (admission \$1) where photos and artifacts trace island history and a collection of fishing tackle documents man's pursuit of watery game.

An anomaly of nature, a herd of buffalo placidly grazes on grassy mountain slopes in the island's interior. They were brought to Catalina in 1924 for the filming of the silent movie *The Vanishing American* written by Zane Grey. Rather than barge the creatures back to the mainland, the movie company left them to multiply into a herd in excess of 200. These buffalo are protected by law, and they are not the source of the buffalo burgers available in Catalina's eateries.

Inland motor tram tours (adults \$27.50) get you close to the shaggy beasts, and are the very best way to explore the island's rugged interior. A motorized tram winds its way up Stagecoach Road where early in the century farsighted citizens planted eucalyptus trees along the narrow, twisty route. The idea was to protect six-horse teams and coaches from careening into the canyons below. Giant mirrors at particularly sharp corners help today's drivers see what's ahead.

Stops along the route include El Rancho Escondido, the Wrigley ranch, where you can sit and sip something cool as you watch spirited Arabian horses show off their beauty and intelligence. The tram climbs more than 2000 feet to Skyline Drive, then stops (on clear days) so shutterbugs can snap photos of a view that extends to the mainland.

Much of Catalina's fascination is in its wildlife. Ravens and red-tail hawks swirl gracefully above near-vertical cliffs, and guests often glimpse small, gray Catalina quail as they scurry into the underbrush. The bald eagle, once driven off the island by hunting and pesticides, has been re-introduced and sometimes is seen soaring along coastline cliffs. The island fox, an appealing creature about the size of a house cat, is found only on Catalina.

WATERY ADVENTURES

Scuba divers are attracted by Catalina's clear water and abundant sea life. Golden garibaldi darting among forests of undulating kelp and wrecks of pleasure boats that strayed too near the rocky coast are part of the underwater panorama. Spiny lobster, bat rays, moray eels and playful sea lions add fun to the dives. Little Casino Reef, a protected underwater park, is accessible from shore and is frequently used for check-out dives and snorkeling. A number of local dive shops rent gear, supply air fills and arrange guided scuba and snorkel tours.

Those who prefer to view denizens of the deep from a distance can explore underwater via the Starlight or Emerald, a pair of 60-foot semi-submersibles. Thirty-six passengers at a time get a submarine view of golden garibaldi, kelp forests and other sub-surface life usually seen only by divers. Adult passage is \$18 for the 40-minute narrated trip.

The quest for the wily marlin, dorado, tuna and yellowtail is a favorite pastime for visitors. Sportfishing gear and experienced guides to help you zero in on finned prey are available on the Pleasure Pier. Also on the pier, you can rent skiffs and sailboats, motorboats and small craft to row and pedal.

SEASIDE SHOPPING

Besides a small-town corner drug store, a market, a bank (with an ATM), and a hardware and marine supply store, boutiques and galleries line Crescent Avenue. Cobblestone walkways and fountains give Metropole Market Place a pleasant, vaguely French-Quarter feel. The aggregate of small shops and eateries is an entertaining place to browse, eat a frozen yogurt or have a casual meal. Your nose may lead you to the Catalina Cookie Company, home of the Killer Homemade Brownie.

THE ISTHMUS

Via a 45-minute narrated coastal cruise (\$13.50 adult one-way fare) you can visit Two Harbors at The Isthmus, Catalina's only other inhabited area. It's the site where *Mutiny on the Bounty* and other South Seas films were made in the '20s and '30s. The palm trees along the beach were brought over for filming, and like the buffalo, have flourished in their new environment.

Have lunch at the snack bar and stroll the easy hiking trails. The Banning House Lodge (\$56-\$180 per night) provides overnight bed and breakfast accommodations. Built in 1910 as a summer home for the Banning Brothers (former owners of the island), the lodge features harbor-view rooms furnished in nostalgic prints. Even if you're not an overnight guest, you can stop by for dinner if you make reservations by 2 p.m.

(Free-lance travel writer Judy Wade packs and unpacks in Phoenix, and numbers Catalina among her favorite getaways.)

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GETTING THERE:

CATALINA ISLAND, CALIFORNIA

From Los Angeles, take U. S. 101 south to the Harbor Blvd. Exit in San Pedro. Follow the Catalina Express signs to the ferry (Catalina Express; 310-519-1212; \$35 round trip).

For More Information:

CATALINA VISITORS BUREAU
P. O. Box 217; Avalon, CA 90704
310-510-1520

